

THE CLAIMS OF ART AND LIFE

by Kathleen McDermott

Life for Us by Choman Hardi

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Keeping My Name by Catherine Tufariello

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CHOMAN HARDI IS A KURDISH POET in her very early thirties. A biographical note informs the reader that she “lived in Iraq, Iran and Turkey before coming to England in 1993”. Her childhood was, by any standard, unsettled: her family fled from Iraqi Kurdistan not long after her birth; when they returned, she was five; when the Iraqi government, under Saddam Hussein, gassed the Kurds in 1988, her family fled to Iran again. The poet was then fourteen. At nineteen, she moved to England, and still lives there. Hardi is writing in her second language; she has published three books of poetry in Kurdish; her father is the Kurdish poet Ahmad Hardi.

A poet’s biography can seem more or less important, as it affects their poetry. In Hardi’s case, the biography is overwhelming. While many other young poets have their sexual encounters to write of, or the end of their love affairs, Hardi has a mass gassing. Her subject is not a private, intimate one, such as most writers in the west have, but massive: ideological violence, the repression of an entire people, and how that impinges on the small, suffering individual trying to make the best of what they can.

The great contemporary poet of ideological violence is probably Anthony Hecht, present as a private soldier at the liberation of Flossenburg in 1945: an American Jew of German extraction who wrote in hammered, strictly formal stanzas. The power of his writing came from the contrast between the extremity of his experience and the taut beauty of his verse’s formal structures. By contrast, Hardi writes in free verse. Its main strength is not its music but its documentary veracity. There is no postmodern tricksiness, there is little invention, there is no whiff of playing with reality: the poems bear witness. The reader is unlikely to differentiate the narrator in most of the poems from the author.

It would be a grimly aesthetic reviewer who would not grant the import of such subject matter. The threat of death and displacement hangs over the small, modest aspirations of the ‘ordinary’ people in these poems like a massive cliff over a field of flowers. Understandably, tonally many of the poems are tinged with sadness, ghosted by wistfulness for a happy past. They are poems of exile.

The volume begins with ‘There was ...’, a poem about retrospective

happiness. The first three stanzas are in the present tense, describing “a place where you can hear the satisfaction of the land / when the first rain falls...” and “a house with four bedrooms / where a couple live with their three children”. The remainder of the poem describes aspects of the narrator’s and her family’s life in that same house, but in the imperfect tense; the poem is about displacement. The volume closes with a bleak little love poem; the poet is married, in England, in bed with her sleeping partner, unable “to stop thinking of tomorrow’s chores / and yesterday’s pain”, wishing she could “freeze” her thoughts on her husband.

In between these two poles, the memory of a past happy until devastated, and of an exiled present, the poet writes poems about her parents and family in a world in which the domestic and horrific are juxtaposed, and overloomed by Saddam Hussein, the deity-like “Him” of ‘Nights in the Cellar’, responsible for dropping gas on Halabja on 16 March, 1988. Returning from the mountains, seeing the destruction, the poet closes the poem:

I stand here watching, crying and not crying.
 I know that I don’t know anything,
 that I will never know anything
 and I know that this ruin
 is the only knowledge I will ever have.

It is not all unrelentingly grim, however. The brief gaieties of childhood still make their claim. In ‘At the Border, 1979’, the family are crossing into Iran, on “land divided by a thick iron chain”. It continues:

My sister put her leg across it.
 ‘Look over here,’ she said to us,
 ‘my right leg is in this country
 and my left leg in the other.’
 The border guards told her off.

‘Two Pages’ is one of the more unusual poems, in that the narrator of each is the page itself. One contains a grievous message for a woman; the other is blank, dropped with thousands of others as a wind test for chemical gas which followed two hours later.

The disjunction between the poet’s present and the devastations of her past are a frequent theme. In ‘The Songs’ she returns fifteen years later to her hometown to buy, in a music shop, songs current when she was fourteen, “full of timid dreams” and “... passionately in love / but didn’t know with whom”. Back in Britain, she plays the songs again, songs which, for her, “never grew old”

and were first heard when she “knew what it meant / for a brother to survive the other’s hanging”. Her husband “likes listening to them”. The poem deals with the power of association; Hardi’s and her husband’s different backgrounds are foregrounded. The tension of such a “mixed marriage” is present in a number of the book’s later poems, and there are moving poems about miscarriage, equated by the poet with the empty villages of her adolescence: the intimate is linked to the social.

Life for Us is not, technique-wise, great poetry. It is, though, moving and genuine, and it has a hefty documentary force. It foregrounds subject matter, not the manner of its saying. Art, too, of course, has its claim. It would be interesting to see what Choman Hardi would write if she imposed on herself greater formal discipline.

Catherine Tufariello, an American of Italian background, is in many ways the opposite of Hardi. Tufariello has been associated with American New Formalism. *Keeping My Name* is an austere if handsome hardback which won The Walt McDonald First Book Award from Texas Tech University. There is barely a line of free verse in the volume; everything gives the impression of having been weighted, considered, and adjusted. It is a much more literary performance than *Life for Us*. A review in *Poetry* by Brian Phillips in February 2005, with reference to the New Formalists (everyone seems to like taking a swing at them) referred to “the absurd quaintness of contemporary life slipped too blithely into iambs”, in connection with Tufariello’s book. Meanwhile, among the collection’s advocates, Timothy Steele celebrates the “small ordinary decencies” in the poems; they “nourish the faith that we are, individually and collectively, capable of progress, fulfillment, and redemption”. The front sleeve comes with a glowing encomium from Richard Wilbur.

The volume’s 48 poems are presented in five sections, ‘Free Time’, ‘Seasons of the Moon’, ‘Go, Grieving Rhymes’, ‘Annunciations’, and ‘In the Waiting Room’. Broadly speaking, section I looks outward; section II primarily contains family poems and intimations of a breakdown in a marriage which, unexpectedly, survives; section III, as if celebrating this survival, comprises translations of love poems by Cavalcanti, Guinizelli, and Petrarch; section IV, recensions of Biblical episodes involving men and women; and V is a narrative sequence of a woman’s eventually successful attempts to conceive a child.

Tonally, the poems are understated, decorous, and sonorously formal. They have something of a suburban range of concerns. They celebrate the domestic and the local. So the poet writes a slight, immaculately constructed, and very likeable poem for a stray cat, Bottlebrush, in four shapely stanzas; in ‘Crossed Wires’ a narrator ends up inadvertently in a three way telephone conversation, which is “Just another / of the curious intimacies of New York”. When she writes about a walrus, it is not a wild one but the “shambling, bald,

obese / Old man in slippers” memorably and exactly portrayed in ‘The Walrus at Coney Island’. At the poem’s close it is “roguish as a boy / Corkscrewing downward with what looks like joy”. Tufariello’s scrupulousness is apparent in that “what looks like”. She does not presume; it is an aspect of her strength.

When she turns her attention to bigger themes, the results can be powerful. In the book’s second poem, ‘February 18, 1943’, the narrator recounts the tale of Hans and Sophie Scholl, “leaders of the White Rose student resistance movement” executed after distributing leaflets. The poem speculates about how the pair could have escaped if they’d chosen to:

You’d left your leaflets scattered on the floors
 In the hallways, on windowsills, at the doors
 Of the lecture rooms, and, ignoring their stony stares,
 In the marble laps of Ludwig and Leopold.
 Was it the change in weather
 That made your glances catch, a glance that said
 Almost gaily, *Why waste any?* So that instead
 Of slipping away as planned, you raced together
 Back to the empty hall,
 And up the stairs, to let the last ones fall?

One cavils a little at that near-cliché, “stony” as a modifier to “stares”, but the poem is one of the volume’s strongest; it has all the drama of a climactic scene in a film. Sophie Scholl is referred to again in one of the volume’s strongest later poems, ‘Twenty Weeks’, addressed to Tufariello’s daughter, “Sophie Rose” on the 68th anniversary of Scholl’s execution. Such references and allusions increase the scope of a poem’s concerns; they lift it out of the purely personal. Another of the volume’s best poems, ‘A Proposal in the Cleveland Museum, Winter 2000’ is the vividly imagined re-enactment of a story told to her by the English poet Dick Davis. A lover, with the covert help of a museum guard, proposes to his fiancée in the busy museum via an easel turned round at an appropriate moment. The risk of the poem reading sentimentally is leavened by the fiancée’s being “an older woman” — “plump, fortyish, unfashionably dressed”.

The difficulty of decorous content allied to form gracefully employed is that it may seem too sonorous for some contemporary readers. Tufariello can, surprisingly often, carry it off — she writes convincingly about happiness, a difficult achievement she shares with her admirer, Richard Wilbur. I for one would like to see what she might achieve with more grittiness of diction and subject matter allied to her undoubted formal skills.